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Ho-Chunk aims at wrong location

Daily Herald Reports

Posted June 08, 2003

The Ho-Chunk Nation is proposing what amounts to a miniature Wisconsin Dells along a stretch of I-90 in Hoffman Estates, and we must admit, the concept of an entertainment complex in that area is intriguing.

Despite that, the casino project is not one we can embrace. In many respects, it may be good for Hoffman Estates. But it is not good for the region or the state of Illinois. We would hope municipal officials would take that broader view rather than a parochial one that ignores any community's obligations to its neighbors.

Our concerns don't relate to the quality of the project itself. Actually, we are impressed by it. The proposal is not confined to a lucrative casino, but also would include a 12-story hotel, a large indoor-and-outdoor water park, an 8,000-seat auditorium that would play host to comedy acts and concerts, and an American Indian museum.

From that standpoint, the project would promote tourism that would boost the local economy and provide entertainment options that most of us could enjoy.

But the gaming undoubtedly would draw customers from the Grand Victoria Casino in Elgin, particularly since the casino would have more than five times the number of gaming positions the Grand Victoria is allowed to offer. This is not good. Elgin was awarded a state casino license because it demonstrated it was a community in need of economic redevelopment. Hoffman Estates has no similar need.

The casino also would continue the drain on the economic viability of Arlington Park racetrack, an important institution in the Northwest suburbs and the jewel of Illinois racing.

For those reasons, we wonder why the Ho-Chunk Nation is looking at this location rather than one in, say, Lake County, which can make a much stronger argument for one.

No matter what the location, however, the project would represent a large and undeniable expansion of legal casinos in Illinois. And it would open the door to even more.

This proposal differs from those related to current casinos in that it requires no license from the Illinois Gaming Board. Its authority is granted by the U.S. Department of Interior, which recognizes the Ho-Chunk as a sovereign nation within our borders, and the procedure for it to win approval to build a casino is much easier than for the licensed casinos already in Illinois.

If the Ho-Chunk project is built, it would become the first Indian casino in the state. And that precedent would make it difficult for Illinois to turn down subsequent Indian casino proposals.

So far, Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who can veto any agreement between Hoffman Estates and the Ho-Chunk, is expressing reservations about the project. We hope those reservations turn into formal opposition.

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Doubts cast on tribal casino

By John Patterson Daily Herald State Government Editor

Posted June 07, 2003

SPRINGFIELD - Gov. Rod Blagojevich Friday stopped just short of completely rejecting tribal casinos like the one the Ho-Chunk Nation wants to build in Hoffman Estates.

"I don't think it would be responsible simply to just dismiss these things without taking a look at it in terms of a budget crisis and money for schools and all the rest. But if I were a gambling man, I wouldn't hold your breath," Blagojevich told reporters.

On Wednesday, representatives of the Ho-Chunk Nation unveiled a \$120 million proposal for a casino and entertainment complex on 125 acres along I-90 near Beverly Road. The casino would have 6,000 slot machines and 200 table games - five times the number of positions allowed at existing casinos. Included in the project is a 12-story hotel, an 8,000-seat auditorium and a water park.

But state and federal authorities say Blagojevich has the final say on whether tribal casinos are allowed in Illinois. None currently exists.

Last year, Blagojevich signed a campaign pledge opposing a variety of gambling options, including tribal casinos. While he wouldn't say such casinos never will come to Illinois, the governor clearly expressed doubts about the current plan.

"Something like that, I think has a big burden of proof. And something like that would have to be extremely convincing and extremely compelling and would have to substantially improve schools, health care and public safety to have me take a real look at it," Blagojevich said. "Right now, I'm nowhere near that."

In 1992, the Wisconsin-based St. Croix Chippewa Indians proposed a \$25 million casino in Rolling Meadows. But then-Gov. Jim Edgar opposed it and said federal law allowed him to block it. The proposal withered.

Edgar also nixed plans for a "super bingo" hall in Schaumburg in 1991, and his opposition helped stall a tribal casino proposal for Romeoville in 1996.

Gov. George Ryan never faced a serious tribal casino decision during his four-year term. The closest came when the Miami tribe went to court arguing it still owns much of eastern Illinois. As part its desired settlement, the tribe wanted to locate a casino downstate, but the lawsuit and the casino plan were dropped.

Casino: 'Burden of proof' big, governor says

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Schaumburg sees positives in having a casino neighbor

By Eric Peterson Daily Herald Staff Writer

Posted June 06, 2003

Hoffman Estates and Ho-Chunk Nation officials have not yet heard a discouraging word from their nearest neighbors over a plan for a major casino complex in the village.

Illinois' governor and area legislators may be weighing in against the \$120 million casino and family entertainment complex, but officials from Schaumburg seem to regard the idea.

In fact, Schaumburg officials think their own plans for a convention center might be complemented by some features of the Ho-Chunk proposal.

The proposed Ho-Chunk development would put a 350,000-square-foot casino, an 8,000-seat auditorium, an 801-room hotel and a water park near the northwest corner of I-90 and Beverly Road.

Schaumburg, meanwhile, has reached the design phase for a convention center that would include a 500-room hotel and 2,400-seat performing arts theater at I-90 and Meacham Road.

"I guess I'm not too concerned about (the Ho-Chunk proposal)," Schaumburg Trustee Tom Dailly said. "They will provide a conference hall that's on a much smaller scale."

Schaumburg's convention center will host major business functions as its main focus, Dailly said. It will include a 100,000-square-foot exhibit hall and 50,000 square feet of meeting space.

The conference center of the proposed Ho-Chunk hotel, in contrast, would be 20,000 square feet.

Meanwhile, the acts booked for the convention center's performing arts center would likely be on a smaller scale than those the Ho-Chunk Nation seems to have in mind, Dailly said.

Schaumburg Trustee Marge Connelly said one thing that surely won't be affected is Schaumburg's intention to move ahead with its plans.

"I think our project is a little further along," she said, citing the state and federal approvals the Ho-Chunk plan requires.

But she believes that if both were built, the two villages may equally benefit from crossovers between the markets.

While Schaumburg already boasts a large shopping base, she said, the combination of a business convention center in one village and an entertainment venue in the other may make the whole area even more attractive to visitors.

South Barrington Village President Frank Munao, who recently signed a long-awaited boundary agreement with Hoffman Estates, said he believes his village would be much less affected by the casino than it was by the now-defunct Poplar Creek Music Theater in Hoffman Estates.

Additional traffic would largely be borne by Higgins Road, which is able to handle an increase, he said.

Neither South Barrington nor Schaumburg officials said they had any expectation of asking Hoffman Estates for a revenue-sharing agreement.

Hoffman Estates Mayor Bill McLeod said Thursday that talk about revenue-sharing was premature.

Mayors of Streamwood, Rolling Meadows, Palatine and Arlington Heights could not

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Mayors of Streamwood, Rolling Meadows, Palatine and Arlington Heights could not be reached for comment Thursday.

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Power to veto Ho-Chunk plan rests with governor

By Kimbriell Granderson Daily Herald Staff Writer

Posted June 06, 2003

Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich has the power to stop the Ho-Chunk Nation from building a casino in Hoffman Estates, an attorney with the federal Department of the Interior said Thursday.

On Wednesday, Ho-Chunk representatives and Hoffman Estates Mayor Bill McLeod unveiled the \$120 million proposal for a casino and family entertainment center on 125 acres along I-90 near Beverly Road.

The project calls for 6,000 slot machines and 200 table games in the casino, along with a 12-story hotel, an 8,000-seat auditorium, restaurants, a museum/cultural center and an indoor-outdoor water park.

The 6,000 slot machines proposed are five times the number of total gaming positions currently allowed at any of the Illinois' current riverboats.

A Native American gambling facility would not come under the auspices of the Illinois Gaming Board and does not need a state license to proceed.

However, an attorney for the federal Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs said Thursday that Blagojevich could veto the casino portion of the project.

George Skibine, who also is the director of the Office of Indian Gaming, said that even if the Secretary of the Interior, Gale A. Norton, agrees to let the Hoffman Estates land become part of the American Indian land trust, Blagojevich could veto the right to gamble on it.

"Without (the governor's) concurrence, gaming cannot occur on that land, even if it's taken into trust," Skibine said. "If he says no, that's it."

Land can be taken into trust without a state governor's approval in most cases, Skibine explained, like if the Ho-Chunk Nation wanted to build a shopping mall or an office building.

However, if the land is going to be used for gaming, Norton has to first ask the governor to concur that the project is in the best interest of the tribe and that it is not detrimental to the surrounding community.

The trust will not be approved for gaming if the governor disagrees or does not respond, Skibine said.

The governor isn't required to give a reason for his rejection and his decision is not subject to review by a higher authority, he added.

Blagojevich has said he's opposed to a tribal casino in Illinois. On Thursday, his spokeswoman, Abby Ottenhoff, said the governor will not entertain the idea of a Hoffman casino this year and is not in favor of using a tribal casino as a tool to balance the state's budget.

"I can't really speculate what would happen in the future," Ottenhoff said, in response to a question about how Blagojevich might think about it after this year.

"But he's made clear this year that it's something he's not willing to look at."

Melissa Merz, spokeswoman for Attorney General Lisa Madigan's, concurred with the interior department's assessment of the governor's veto power.

However, attorneys for the Ho-Chunk Nation could not be reached Thursday to dispute or concur with that view.

A courtesy review of the plan will be held at 7:30 p.m. Monday at the Hoffman Estates village hall, 1900 Hassell Road. The Ho-Chunk Nation has an option to buy the land, just northwest of I-90 and Beverly Road.

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Ho-Chunk plan dwarfs what rivals now offer

By Eric Peterson and Kimbriell Granderson Daily Herald Staff Writers

Posted June 05, 2003

With 6,000 slot machines and 200 table games, the Ho-Chunk Nation is proposing a casino and family entertainment complex for Hoffman Estates on a scale that dwarfs any of Illinois' current riverboats.

The massive Ho-Chunk complex, proposed for the Plote land along the north side of I-90, would have more than five times the number of gaming positions currently allowed at other Illinois casinos. Also part of the plan is a 12-story, 801-room hotel, an indoor-outdoor water park, a 8,000-seat auditorium and an American Indian museum.

Ho-Chunk officials predicted Wednesday that if approved, the casino complex would pump \$1 billion into the local economy each year, outside of the money generated by construction alone of the \$120 million project.

About 3,800 people would be employed at the various functions of the facility. And the Nation would rely on local vendors for all manner of goods and services, officials said.

Details of the plan were released to the Daily Herald on Wednesday.

If the project were to get both local and state approval - involving a length of time Ho-Chunk officials were unwilling to even guess at Wednesday - the development would take between 18 months and two years to build, they said.

The site the tribe is considering for the project lies just west of property owned by Life Changers International Church at the northwest corner of I-90 and Beverly Road.

The project already has the enthusiastic support of Hoffman Estates Mayor Bill McLeod. The rest of the Hoffman Estates village board will be shown the details publicly later this month.

"I think it's an excellent economic opportunity for the village of Hoffman Estates," he said. "We had Poplar Creek (Music Theater), but now that's gone. The water park would be nice."

Nancy Lee Carlson, special counsel to the Ho-Chunk Nation, said the tribe will not seek the state's 10th casino license, because it doesn't need it.

Indian gaming isn't regulated by state laws. It's federally controlled under the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, which was enacted by Congress in 1988 and is overseen by the National Indian Gaming Commission.

The Ho-Chunk Indians, formerly the Winnebagos, believe they have the authority to open a casino in Illinois. Northern Illinois was part of the ancestral lands that once belonged to their tribe, which also extend throughout Wisconsin and into Minnesota and Iowa, Carlson said.

The two-story casino itself would be 350,000 square feet - of which 200,000 square feet would be actual gaming space. The building would have 6,000 slot machines and 200 table games.

In contrast, Illinois riverboats are limited to 1,200 gaming positions total, according to Tom Swoik, executive director of the Illinois Casino Gaming Association.

Ho-Chunk officials were unable to pinpoint the exact number of gaming positions they are seeking, because the type of table games are not yet determined.

But the slots alone represent five times the number of gaming spots allowed currently under Illinois law for private casino owners.

Officials are also planning a 350-seat sports bar - but will not have sports wagering - and a 250-seat coffee shop for inside the casino building.

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The site would boast 19,000 parking spaces divided between a multi-story structure and a single-level lot.

Next to the casino around a circular central pavilion and fountain would be the 1.3-million-square-foot hotel. It would have 801 suites, 30,000 square feet of shops, a 20,000-square-foot health club and similarly sized conference facility, as well as a 300-seat steakhouse.

The 127,000-square-foot water park would have about two-thirds of its space indoors and would be open year-round.

The amphitheater is intended to boast headlining, family-friendly acts including musicians, comedians and stage productions.

An aspect of the plan the Ho-Chunk Nation is particularly pleased about is the 15,000-square-foot museum and cultural center, intended to educate visitors on the area's American Indian history.

"We hope this will be to the benefit of Illinois schoolchildren," Ho-Chunk Nation President Troy Swallow said.

The development would also feature a gas station and convenience store.

Swallow said that from a gaming aspect there is nothing new about this proposal - even though the casino alone is more than twice the size of the Nation's largest near the Wisconsin Dells.

But what is most unique about the project, he feels, is all the other aspects that go along with it - particularly the cultural ones that he feels will be a boon to the community.

Casino: Cultural center, amphitheater part of plan

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By Kimbriell Granderson Daily Herald Staff Writer

Posted on January 22, 2003

The Ho-Chunk Nation wants to build Illinois' first Indian-run casino in Hoffman Estates -- a plan that would bypass intense wrangling over a state gaming license.

As competition for the remaining gaming license intensifies, the tribe's plan could move ahead because it does not need a state license. Federal law gives it the right to open a casino with approval of the U.S. Department of Interior and the governor.

Within the past 60 days, the Ho-Chunk Nation, which runs four casinos in Wisconsin, negotiated a long-term option to buy 125 acres of land in north Hoffman Estates, said Warren Fuller, an attorney representing the seller, and Nancy Lee Carlson, special counsel to the Ho-Chunk Nation, based in Black River Falls, Wis.

Hoffman Estates Mayor Bill McLeod said: "It's an interesting proposition. It could be lucrative. We'll take a look at it and go from there."

The land, now owned by the Plote family, is northwest of the Northwest Tollway and Beverly Road, and directly west of a proposed 30-acre campus for Life Changers International Church. The land also was considered by the Chicago Bears for a stadium in 1996. Hoffman Estates is an area where the tribe once lived and hunted, Carlson said.

The plan calls for a family-oriented campus with a casino, hotel, indoor/outdoor water park, indoor auditorium and a cultural center highlighting Ho-Chunk history, Carlson said. The plan is in its early stages, and no cost estimates have been made, she said.

The casino would be built on dry land and would be managed by Ho-Chunk.

"The Ho-Chunk Nation has been a pillar of decency and they are a good business neighbor," Carlson said. "They have not been tainted with scandal."

An Indian-run casino would not have to pay Illinois' hefty gaming taxes. However, the Ho-Chunk Nation, through a contract with the governor, would expect to pay other taxes that could end up being nearly as high -- as it has done in Wisconsin, said William Boulware, legislative counsel for the tribe.

A spokesman for Gov. Rod Blagojevich could not be reached Tuesday

night.

Hoffman Estates would benefit from hotel and sales taxes, as well as a possible tax based on the land value. The group will not seek economic incentives from the village, Carlson said.

Money from the facility would go to the Ho-Chunk Nation, not an individual owner, Carlson said.

No closing date on the land has been set, Carlson said. She would not discuss terms of the sale or when the option will expire but did say the option is lengthy and that concrete plans for the project won't be known until summer 2004.

"We are just in the embryonic stages of this property. We don't have our environmental assessments done yet and we haven't done our feasibility studies of what we're going to do with the property yet. We don't have an architect yet. We don't have any plans yet."

The legislative body of the Ho-Chunk Nation must approve the final plans for Hoffman Estates before anything is built. And the village board would have to approve construction plans.

It isn't the first pitch for an Indian casino in the Northwest suburbs. Plans for one in Rolling Meadows fell through in the early 1990s after residents voted down the proposal. The city council, however, voted in favor of the project, but the tribe ended up walking away from the deal, said 1st Ward Alderman Ken Nelson.

Because the Ho-Chunk Indian tribe is sovereign, operating as a separate nation, it's not controlled by laws of the state. Instead, its gaming is controlled by the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, Carlson said.

"The federal government does have a hand in terms of the land," Carlson said. While the Ho-Chunk Nation would operate the facilities and reap their benefits, the land would be placed in a trust held by the federal government.

Today, the tribe is made up of 6,159 members and owns 2,000 acres. Its members live in Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota and a small portion of Indiana.

News of Ho-Chunk's interest came as the battle for the last state casino license continued in both legal and public venues. While the Illinois Gaming Board threatened to reopen a lengthy hearing process into the last owner of the license, Waukegan Mayor Richard Hyde made a pitch for putting a casino in the shuttered Lakehurst Mall, a mile east of the Tri-State Tollway and Route 120. Joined by state and Lake County officials, Hyde said a casino would bring much-needed economic development and jobs to Waukegan.

Casino: Ho-Chunk's plans merely are in 'embryonic stage'

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Ho-Chunk casino plan makes neighbors uneasy

By Kimbriell Granderson Daily Herald Staff Writer

Posted on January 23, 2003

Not everyone would be a winner with plans for a casino in Hoffman Estates.

Before state regulators squashed the project to put a casino in Rosemont, the city of Elgin estimated it would lose 30 percent its tax revenues generated by the Grand Victoria Casino, just 23 miles from Rosemont.

Now Elgin officials are on edge once again after finding out the Wisconsin-based Ho-Chunk Nation could put a casino just 5 miles away in Hoffman Estates.

"That's right around the corner from us. It's too close for comfort," said Interim City Manager Femi Folarin. "It's hard to lose sleep over it because you don't know if it's something like what's happened before (with Rosemont), or if it's real this time."

Elgin Mayor Ed Schock could not be reached for comment on the proposal, but Councilman Bob Gilliam said, "For a selfish matter, I would prefer not to see it."

The Grand Victoria is one of four gaming boats in northern Illinois and is the state's highest-grossing casino, with receipts of \$416 million in 2001. Elgin received \$23 million in taxes that year, which it spent on capital projects instead of operating expenses because of the uncertainty of the windfall.

"There might be an end to that golden road," said Elgin Councilwoman Marie Yearman because the Ho-Chunk casino is a place you want to go for the weekend. "The (Elgin) boat's down there in the water by itself."

Within the past 60 days, the Ho-Chunk Nation negotiated a long-term option on 125 acres at the northwest corner of the I-90 Northwest Tollway and Beverly Road. The tribe's plan is to build a family-oriented campus, including a casino, hotel, indoor/outdoor water park, indoor auditorium and a cultural center highlighting Ho-Chunk history.

Officials at the Grand Victoria say they have other, more imminent dangers to worry about.

"There are other proposals that carry more risk," said Guy Chipparoni, a spokesperson for the Grand Victoria Casino, referring to proposed casinos in Des Plaines, Waukegan and Chicago. "It's certainly a long process, and we'll keep an eye on it. We're just focused on trying to manage the business right now."

While Elgin officials wish the project would go away, their counterparts in Hoffman Estates are somewhat optimistic about the potentially lucrative proposal.

"I am a little excited about this possibility. But it could go the way the Bears went, too," said Hoffman Estates Trustee Ed Frank, referring to an option the Bears let expire on part of the same land, owned by the Plote family, while considering building a stadium there in 1996.

"But I think this would be a little more lucrative to the village than having the Bears here. The Bears play 11 games a year. This is an every-night-of-the-week game," Frank said.

Hoffman Estates would benefit from hotel and sales taxes, as well as a possible tax based on the land value. The Ho-Chunk Nation will not seek economic incentives from the village, officials with the group said this week.

The legislative body of the Ho-Chunk Nation must approve the final plans for Hoffman Estates before anything is built. And the village board would have to approve construction plans.

The Ho-Chunk Nation operates three gaming facilities and one bingo parlor in Wisconsin. This would be Illinois' first Indian-run casino.

"It's an interesting concept and it's something you can't just turn your back on," said Hoffman Estates Trustee Karen Mills.

Trustee Sue Kenley-Rupnow said she has no opinion either way about the plan. "I don't know enough about it. I would remiss to say whether I think it's good or bad."

Meanwhile, analysts predict that the Indian-owned casino would cause unfair competition because it's absolved of the state laws that have limited other gaming operations through hefty gaming taxes and stifling the number of players it can serve.

Illinois is the only state in the nation with limits on the number of gaming positions. For example, current law allows each casino in the state to have only 1,200 gaming positions, divided between slot machines and table games.

The gaming industry is trying to get that limit lifted. Meanwhile, Illinois has lost 4.5 percent of its share of gambling since Indiana casinos went to dockside gaming in August, said Tom Swoik, executive director of the Illinois Casino Gaming Association.

Because Indian-owned casinos are regulated by the federal government, they can build larger casinos.

"That's hardly fair to the existing operations," Swoik said.

In addition, because the Ho-Chunk Nation is sovereign, looked upon as a separate nation, it would pay not property or gaming taxes.

As competition for the state's remaining gaming license intensifies, the tribe's plan could move ahead because it does not need a state license. Federal law gives it the right to open a casino with approval of the U.S. Department of Interior and the governor.

"I could not see the governor accepting something like that unless there was an equivalent amount of tax that they would be willing to pay the state," Swoik said.

Residents in Hoffman Estates, however, are mixed on the issue. Kuldip Singh Makker said gambling can upset normal domestic family life, cause people to become alcoholics and cause depression.

Another resident, however, saw it as a good economic engine for the village.

"I think it'd be great," said 30-year resident Jill Blodgett, who also is the chamber of commerce president. "I think it would provide a real destination for people to go to in Hoffman Estates - certainly some unique entertainment around here with not just the casino, but the water park and museum. And logically, it could be expanded from there.

"When you go down to Disney World, you don't necessarily stay on Disney property. It could certainly make a whole lot of things grow in the Hoffman area. That's from the hat of a taxpayer," she said.

Casino: Plan draws mixed reviews in Hoffman Estates

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